



A Little Something for Me and Maybe for You, too: Promotions that Relieve Guilt

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Introduction

The goal of this research was to investigate whether considering the balances of intrapersonal and interpersonal consumption would reduce consumption guilt.

Feelings of guilt discourage many consumers from purchasing products and services they associate primarily with pleasure (Okada 2005), especially when consuming them is considered unhealthy or improper (Prelec and Herrnstein 1991), models or packages that are higher priced because they include unnecessary features (Nowlis and Simonson 1996), and other items whose purchase is perceived as violating social or cultural norms (Lascu 1991; Thaler and Shefrin, 1981).

We show that gift-with-purchase promotions designed with careful attention to the nature of the gift and its intended user can reduce guilt by counterbalancing the self-indulgence or creating a favorable comparison with another's consumption.

Conceptual Framework

We argue that consumption guilt results primarily from two forces.

The first is intrapersonal and derives from the desire to counterbalance guilt-inducing consumption.



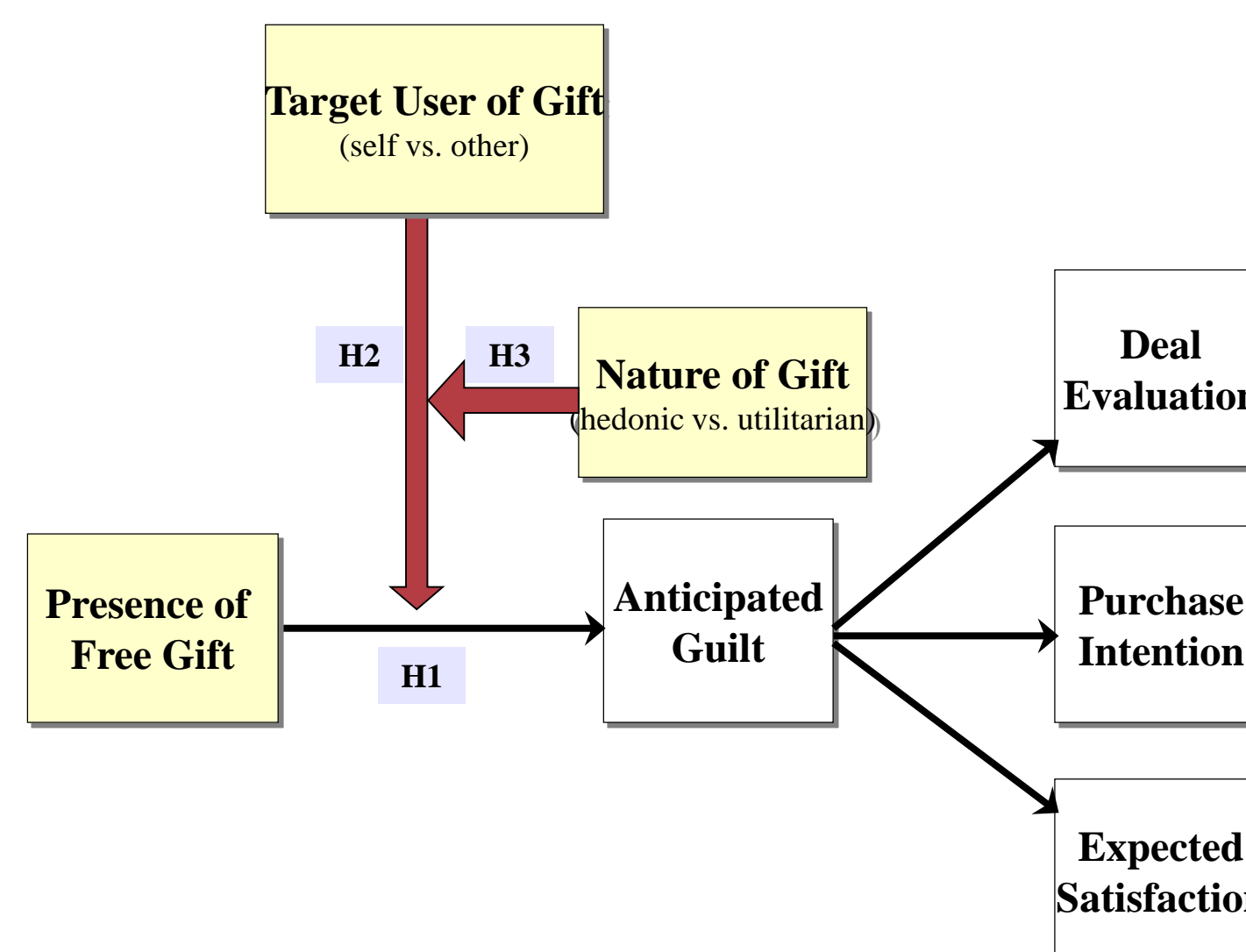
The second force is interpersonal and stems from the desire to consume fairly or equitably.



Hypotheses

We focus on ability of gift-with-purchase promotions to help consumers justify the purchase of guilt-inducing items. This justification takes three forms:

Reducing Anticipated Guilt through Free Gift Promotions



H1: The presence of a gift with purchase that is viewed as having utility **a)** reduces feelings of guilt associated with the purchase and **b)** increases the likelihood of purchase.

H2: The presence of a guilt-neutral gift with purchase intended for use by the purchaser **a)** reduces feelings of guilt associated with the purchase and **b)** increases the likelihood of purchase more than either a guilt-inducing gift or no gift at all.

H3: The presence of a guilt-inducing gift intended for use by someone else **a)** reduces feelings of guilt associated with the purchase and **b)** increases the likelihood of purchase more than a guilt-neutral gift or no gift at all.

Methodology

Two lab experiments were conducted with standard consumer behavior manipulation procedures. We utilized a judgment task in Experiment 1 and a choice task in Experiment 2 to increase generalizability. Random assignment across conditions and manipulation checks ensured internal validity.

Experiment 1 (judgment task) involved a 2 (nature of gift: guilt-inducing vs. guilt-neutral) \times 2 (intended user of gift: self vs. other) plus a control (no gift included) between-subjects factorial design with 109 subjects. Experiment 2 (choice task) was in a two-cell between-subjects design (purchaser vs. someone else) with 120 subjects.

Results

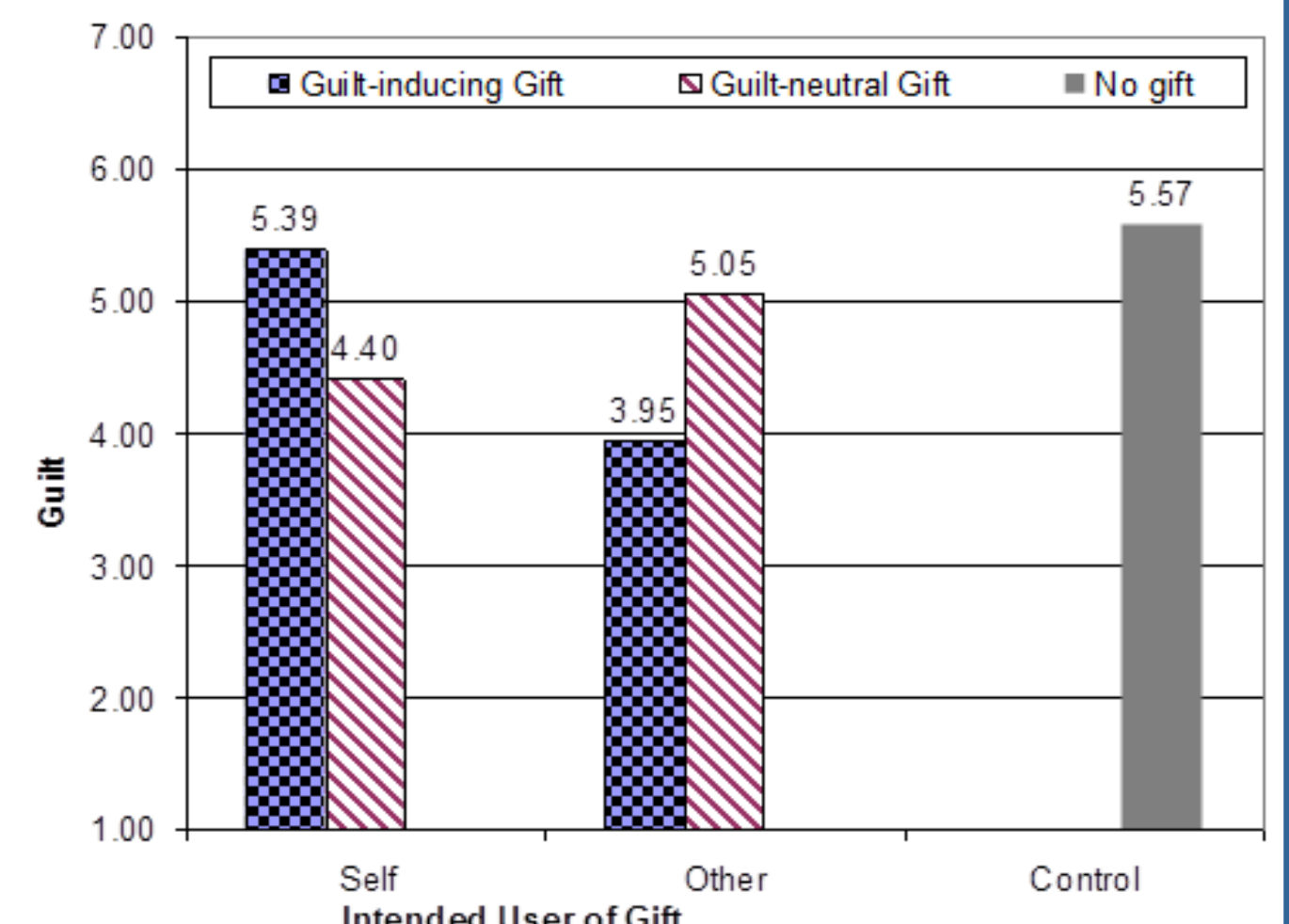
Experiment 1 – judgment task

H1a : gift vs. gift-with-purchase ($p = .0483$).

H2a : guilt-neutral gift for the purchaser vs. control ($p = .0419$)

H3a: guilt-inducing gift for someone else vs. control ($p = .0047$)

Significant interaction between the nature of the gift and intended user ($p = .0266$, $\eta^2 = .06$)



Experiment 2 – choice task:

H1b, H2b, H3b: Intended user had statistically significant effects on:

gift selection ($\chi^2 = 20.72$, $p < .0001$),

deal satisfaction ($\chi^2 = 19.02$, $p < .0001$),

deal evaluation ($\chi^2 = 9.55$, $p = .002$),

purchase intention ($\chi^2 = 15.88$, $p < .0001$).

General Discussion

Consistent with our hypotheses, our findings showed that two types of gifts (guilt-neutral gifts intended for the purchaser's own consumption and guilt-inducing gifts intended for someone else's consumption) were more effective in reducing guilt and, consequently, increasing expected deal satisfaction, deal evaluation, and purchase intentions than other types of gifts or no gift at all.

Our research contributes to the academic literature of consumer guilt in marketing by introducing a new moderator -- the ability of a popular promotional tactic (gifts-with-purchase) in helping consumers overcome consumption guilt.

Additionally, we add value by suggesting to practitioners that using different gift design criteria can capitalize on the affective potential of gift-with-purchase promotions and remove an important barrier to the purchase of guilt-inducing products and services.